

Essay Unknown Soldier

Retrospective: Michael Friedman

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Portrait of Michael Friedman by Monica Simoes

As a composer and lyricist, Michael Friedman is remembered not only for the virtuosity and versatility of his music but also for the compassion that drove his artistry. According to *The New York Times*, Michael brought “a historian’s eye and a journalistic sensibility to pathbreaking work off and on Broadway,” deploying a wide array of musical genres to depict an even wider array of subjects. He built songs that built worlds, traversing broad swathes of time and space in order to get a closer look at the human condition – in particular, those sometimes-funny, sometimes-sad moments of heartache, heartbreak, and hope that all together make up a life. It is with deep gratitude and admiration, then, that we welcome librettist and lyricist Daniel Goldstein and director Trip Cullman, Michael’s close collaborators, to Playwrights in order to realize *Unknown Soldier*, one of the last shows Michael wrote. We invite you to join us in celebrating his legacy by celebrating what he left for us – his music.

As a Music Director

Michael’s journey into professional theater-making began as soon as he graduated from Harvard. There, he met composer Elizabeth Swados, who was serving as an artist-in-residence at the college. “My entire career, almost all the people I know and the work I’ve done,” he told the *Times*, “can be traced back to Liz Swados.” They met in her musical composition course, where he impressed her with his innate talent for the art. As Swados herself said, “I was very encouraging and said he should be doing this.” Naturally, she gave him gigs. Upon moving to New York in 1997, he served as the music director for Swados’s productions of *Cantata 2000* (1997) and Bertolt Brecht’s *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* at La MaMa (1998). Swados also introduced him to the director Andrei Serban, who hired him as the music director for The Public’s production of *Cymbeline* (1998) at the Delacorte Theatre in Central Park and, three years later, for Mike Nichols’ production of *The Seagull* (2001), also at the Delacorte.

Michael’s reputation as a music director only continued to blossom. He frequently served as a music director at American Repertory Theater, working on Christopher Durang’s *The Idiots Karamazov* (1999), Andrei’s productions of *The Merchant of Venice* (1999) and *Lysistrata* (2002), and Peter Weiss’s *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade* (2002).

Michael also acted as music director for John Guare’s noir fantasy *Landscape Of The Body* (2006) at Signature, with Michael Greif directing. He’d join Michael again the following year, for Rinne Groff’s *In The Bubble* at Northwestern

University (2007), The Public's production of *Romeo of Juliet* (2007), and more recently for its production of *The Tempest* (2015) – though for these projects, Michael served as composer.

Scores for Plays

The years of classical training behind Michael's success as a music director are also, in part, what made him an excellent composer for the stage. But he wasn't just technically skilled. He could do more than listen to the notes and direct their sounds – he could write them, with an ear for their meanings and the responses they'd invite. To compose the score for a play is, in a way, to translate the play – its pitches and flights, its turns and halts – from the language of words to the language of music. To be sure, the score is not merely an imitation of the actions and ideas played out onstage. Nor is it simply accompaniment. Instead, the score enriches, it clarifies, it offers insights that, if not for the tones and textures of music, might evaporate altogether.

Though Michael was a latecomer to the theater, he demonstrated an immediate and intuitive feel for it. "I saw a lot of musicals growing up," he told the *Los Angeles Times*, "but I never wrote a song until I was 25, which is a little embarrassing. When you come to something at 25, you are an outsider and always will be. My approach is to show up and say, 'OK, let's figure out how to do this.' I enjoy that, hitting the ground running."

And hit the ground running he did. Friedman's body of work as a composer is, to say the least, immense. He composed the scores for Charles Dickens parodies (Christopher Durang's *Mrs. Bob Cratchit's Wild Christmas Binge* at City Theatre in 2002); lush fables (Darko Tresnjak's *The Blue Demon* at Huntington Theatre Company in 2003); graduate school digressions (Melissa James Gibson's *Suitcase, Or, Those That Resemble Flies From a Distance* at Soho Rep in 2004); vaudevillian satires (Sean Cunningham's *God Hates The Irish: The Ballad Of Armless Johnny* at Rattlestick in 2005); Lewis Carroll adaptations (Annie Weisman's *The Essential Alice* at La Jolla in 2005); Prohibition-era comedies (Jordan Harrison's *Act a Lady* at the Humana Festival of New American Plays in 2006); mythological histories (*The Communist Dracula Pageant: By Americans, For Americans, With Hallucinations, Phosphorescence, and Bears* at American Repertory Theater in 2008); breathtaking revivals (Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* at Signature in 2010); Shakespeare in the Park (Alex Timbers' adaptation of *Love's Labours Lost* at The Public in 2013); and Broadway thrillers (William Goldman's *Misery* in 2015 based on Stephen King's novel).



Photo of Sue Jean Kim, Marissa Dizzia and Cassie Beck in *The Drunken City* by Joan Marcus

As a composer, Michael was no stranger to Playwrights Horizons. In 2004 he wrote original music for Neal Bell's eerie, grimly funny whodunit *Spatter Pattern*. Then in 2008, he wrote the music for Adam Bock's *The Drunken City*, an off-kilter romantic comedy directed by Trip Cullman. Michael returned to Playwrights five years later to score Anne Washburn's *Mr. Burns, a post-electric play* (2013), directed by Steve Cosson and developed with The Civilians, the investigative theater company Cosson founded with Michael as an associate artist. Lauded by the *Times* as "downright brilliant," *Mr. Burns* barrels headlong into a post-apocalyptic future, dragging *The Simpsons* along with it. The third act is a full-on musical: those who have survived to found a new civilization take the *Simpsons* episode "Cape Feare" as the ur-text of their collective dreaming. In an interview with Playwrights, Michael admitted to being "sort of a magpie" because he loved "stealing from popular culture and popular music." It was a welcome challenge for him, with *Mr. Burns*, to "create a unified theatrical gesture" out of a "melange" of familiar pop melodies, Gilbert and Sullivan tunes, and, of course, the memorable theme from "Cape Feare," a four-note arpeggio tumbling down.

Music and Lyrics

Of course, Michael wasn't just a prominent music director or a master composer – he was also a stunning lyricist. As Casper Grathwohl wrote for the *Times*, he could do "a little bit of everything."

In 2007, he wrote the songs for two plays: Melanie Marnich's adaptation of Katie Couric's book *The Brand New Kid* and Jenny Schwartz's *God's Ear*, directed by Anne Kauffman at New Georges and later at the Vineyard. An experimental tragedy about love and loss borne out in the space between small talk realities and Tooth Fairy dreamworlds, *God's Ear* left room for Michael to give voice to quiet discoveries palled by grief:

SOMETIMES IN THE WINTER,
YOU WILL CATCH YOURSELF
IN THE MIRROR, AND YOU WILL
KNOW WHAT YOU WILL LOOK LIKE
WHEN YOU ARE OLD.
WHEN YOU ARE OLD.

Lanie, a six-year-old, from *God's Ear*

At Playwrights, Michael wrote the music and lyrics for *Saved* (2008), with John Dempsey and Rinne Groff writing the book and Gary Griffin directing. Garnering a Lucille Lortel Award nomination for Outstanding Musical, *Saved* was, according to the *Times*, a “big-hearted, feel-good” glimpse into Evangelicalism. Michael told Playwrights that he “found the material really right and really exciting.” This was in large part because he was, at the time, working on a different musical with The Civilians called *This Beautiful City* (2008), which also happened to be about the Evangelical movement. As Michael said, *Saved* “felt like a very different way of looking at the same world that I had already immersed myself in.” He relished the opportunity to deepen his thinking about this religious community and the people who belonged to it, and with *Saved*, he got to see it through the eyes of a handful of rising seniors at American Eagle Christian High School. In *Saved*, Michael said, “There’s a lot of comedy” rooted in the “everyday emotions and situations” of these students. But there’s also their turmoil, angst, and hopelessness, which he captures with eloquence in the words of Dean, the captain of the basketball team who struggles with his gay identity:

WHAT’S WRONG WITH ME?
WHY DID GOD MAKE
ME THE WAY I AM?
WHY DO I WANT WHAT I WANT?
AND HOW DO I STOP WANTING?
WHAT’S WRONG WITH ME?
HOW COULD I STOP BEING ME? JUST FOR A DAY
TO STOP BEING ME

Dean, from *Saved*

Michael is perhaps best known for his work on *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*, a rowdy collaboration with Alex Timbers that transferred from The Public to Broadway in 2010. Hailed by the *Times* as “both smarter and cruder than your average Broadway fare,” *Bloody Bloody* is an unapologetic pop-rock ode to the notoriously violent Presidency of Andrew Jackson. With its driving basslines and head-banging power chords, it recalls the punk tenacity of bands like Green Day, blink-182, and Fall Out Boy. In “The Saddest Song,” a roiling ballad that comes

near the end of the musical, anti-hero Andrew Jackson reckons with his fateful choices to the suckerpunch licks of an electric guitar, keeping pace with resplendent anthems like My Chemical Romance's 2006 hit "Welcome to the Black Parade":

SO TONIGHT I'LL SING
THE SADDEST SONGS

TO EVERYONE THAT
I'VE DONE WRONG.

AND IF YOU DON'T KNOW
HOW TO SING ALONG,

WELL I'M SORRY, I'M SORRY, I'M
SORRY BUT THE BAND PLAYS ON.

Andrew Jackson, from
Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson



Photo of Quincy Tyler Bernstine, Jennifer R. Morris, Gibson Frazier, Colleen Werthmann in *Mr. Burns* by Joan Marcus

If *Bloody Bloody* testifies to Michael's flair for pop-punk, *The Fortress of Solitude* confirms his musical prowess, his ability to weave in and out of genres like nothing could be easier. Directed by Daniel Aukin at The Public, with a book by Itamar Moses, and adapted from the the novel by Jonathan Lethem, *Fortress* follows two boys – one white and one black – growing up in Gowanus, a working-class neighborhood in Brooklyn. It's the 1970s, and their names – Dylan and Mingus – call to mind folk luminary Bob Dylan and jazz legend Charles Mingus. The two young friends bond, as kids do, over comic books: *Doctor Strange*, *the Incredible Hulk*, *Thor*, *Batman*, *Aquaman*, and, above all else, *Superman*. It's not all

word balloons and heroics, though. Over the course of almost two decades, they waded through the thorny intersections of race and class – but, thanks to Michael, they do so to an impossibly smooth score woven from funk and soul, rap and folk. *Fortress* is “a history of soul music on a particular block in Brooklyn,” Michael told the *Times*. “All of the characters’ lives are infused with music – CBGB’s, hip-hop, it’s all in there.” Michael moves nimbly from soaring gospel to melodic hip-hop, from torrid groove to sugary rhythm and bass. As Itamar Moses puts it, “He could write in any style as though it were the one he’d grown up steeped in and loving the most.” With its nods to Wild Cherry’s 1976 “Play That Funky Music White Boy” and Al Green’s 1974 “Take Me To the River,” Michael makes it hard to sit still. In “Superman/Sidekick,” sultry chord progressions yawn into ardent yearning and, finally, into up-tempo optimism:

I’M JUST WALKING
DOWN THE STREET

AND THE STREET IS LONELY
THERE’S NO ONE TO SAVE ME
AND NO ONE FOR ME TO SAVE
AND I FEEL LIKE
I COULD BE SUPERMAN
I COULD COME AND SAVE YOU
IF ONLY I COULD FLY

I’M JUST WALKING
DOWN THE STREET

AND I HEAR YOU CALL ME
I HEAR YOU CALL ME
FROM SO FAR
SO FAR AWAY
AND I FEEL LIKE
I COULD BE SUPERMAN
I COULD COME AND SAVE YOU

IF ONLY I COULD FLY, IF ONLY I
COULD FLY, IF ONLY I COULD FLY

Barrett Rude Junior, Mingus’s father, from *Fortress of Solitude*

With The Civilians

An account of Michael’s *oeuvre* would be incomplete without diving into his incredible history with The Civilians – a self-described “investigative theater” that conducts in-depth field research and shares its findings upon the stage.

Committed to its journalistic ethos, Michael was there from the start as one of the company's founding artists. In the words of The Civilians' Artistic Director Steve Cosson, Michael was "fully open to the world." Steve describes Michael as "part-explorer, part-essayist" – he could find "a point of connection with anything."

Indeed, the sheer range of projects Michael took on with The Civilians is dazzling proof of what Steve calls his "enormous capacity for empathy." With The Civilians, Michael wrote the music and lyrics for the troupe's inaugural musical *Canard, Canard, Goose?* (2002); *Gone Missing* (2003), a meditation on losses of all shapes and sizes; *(I Am) Nobody's Lunch* (2006), about the landscape of American politics in the shadow of the Iraq War; *This Beautiful City* (2008), a portrait of Evangelicalism in Colorado Springs; *In The Footprint* (2010), about the Atlantic Yards, the largest land development project in Brooklyn; *Paris Commune* (2012), about a socialist revolution in nineteenth-century France; *The Great Immensity* (2014), a climate-change thriller; *Pretty Filthy* (2015), a showbiz musical about the adult entertainment industry; *State Of The Union Songbook* (2016), just in time for the 2016 presidential election; and *The Abominables* (2017), borne out of a partnership between The Civilians and the Children's Theatre Company.

Michael's work with The Civilians was, Steve told the *Times*, animated by his "deep curiosity and compassion for other people." Michael had a particular talent for finding the hope even in the most hopeless of circumstances – in the ongoing tragedy of environmental collapse, for example. The last song of *The Great Immensity*, assigned to no particular character, calls for any one of the parents in the story to rise and sing. Their children have decided to put themselves on the frontlines of global warming, leaving the adults to grieve but also to persist:

I'M A LITTLE BOAT FLOATING

ALONE IN THE SEA

AS A GREAT SHIP GOES BY

NEVER NOTICING ME

BUT I'LL JUST KEEP LOOKING

FOR WHAT I CAN SEE

TRYING TO LOOK FOR

EACH CONTINGENCY

FOR THE NEXT 50 YEARS

FOR THE NEXT MILLION YEARS

from *The Great Immensity*

Hope, here, is laced with grief. And resilience, Michael tells us through this song, a song that could be a lullaby, requires at least a little devastation.

There is almost always a bittersweetness to Michael's music, an appreciation for the world's consonances and dissonances alike, its potential for harmony alongside its tendency toward harshness. Delight he might have tinged with sorrow; regret he might have lightened with laughter. For him, even the most ordinary of goings-on – especially these – teemed with notes of all colors. "Etch a Sketch," a song from *Gone Missing*, registers the peculiar pang of forgetting, setting playful rhymes to a bright cadence on the piano:

THE SETTING AND THE MORAL OF
EACH OF AESOP'S FABLES

ALL KINDS OF FOREIGN FRUIT

AND HOW TO PLAY THE FLUTE

LATELY THOUGH I FIND THAT I'M
NOT QUITE AS ABLE

TO COME UP
WITH SQUARE ROOTS

OR TRIVIAL PURSUITS

I'M AN ETCH A SKETCH (BUT NOW
I'M ALL SHOOK UP)

I'M A PIECE OF WAX (BUT NOW THE
IMPRINT'S LOST)

CAN'T REMEMBER THE THINGS
THAT I WAS THINKING

LIKE WHEN DO CHICKENS BASTE

OR HOW A KISS SHOULD TASTE

WHO WAS THE PRESIDENT WHO
CAME AFTER LINCOLN?

MY BLACKBOARD'S BEEN ERASED

MY BLACKBOARD'S BEEN ERASED.

from *Gone Missing*

He knew how to say things that would have been unsayable with words alone. Through music, he opened up the concerns and uncertainties of the human heart, giving them density and weight, letting them be felt.

As an Artistic Director

Michael's musicianship was peerless. "Aching with gratitude for the music & joy he gave us," Lin-Manuel Miranda wrote on Twitter. "Mourning all the music we'll never hear." Yet we have cause to mourn not just for his music but also for his leadership in the theater community. As the artistic director of Encores! Off Center, a New York City Center program that presents summertime concert stagings of Off-Broadway musicals, Michael showed a keen interest in raising up the voices of those who had long been silenced. "It is very important to me that we look at people who have been overlooked, or forgotten, or whose place in the canon could be stronger," he said. As an artistic director, he sought to create room for growth, for possibility, for promise.

And his stories, Steve Cosson reminds us, were the same way. They "always just made the world a bigger place."

Additional research by Directing Fellow Ryan Dobrin and Musical Theater Fellow Armelle Kay Harper

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